

VZCZCXR00060
RR RUEHCHI
DE RUEHVN #0312/01 0930953
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
R 030953Z APR 06
FM AMEMBASSY VIENTIANE
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 9774
INFO RUEHBK/AMEMBASSY BANGKOK 6462
RUEHHI/AMEMBASSY HANOI 2616
RUEHGO/AMEMBASSY RANGOON 2066
RUEHPF/AMEMBASSY PHNOM PENH 1738
RUEHCHI/AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI 0323
RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 VIENTIANE 000312

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR EAP/MLS, INR/B

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/03/2016

TAGS: PGOV PINR PREL LA

SUBJECT: LAOS' NEW PARTY SECRETARY-GENERAL CHOUMMALY
SAYASONE

REF: A. VIENTIANE 275

¶B. VIENTIANE 306

Classified By: Ambassador Patricia M. Haslach, reason 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) The 8th Party Congress of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) elected Choummaly Sayasone as its new Secretary-General on March 21. Choummaly has been a fixture in the Central Committee for more than two decades, but remains one of the least-known of the senior leaders. A long-time protege of retiring Party Secretary Khamtai Siphandone (and Khamtai's hand-picked successor to the position), Choummaly can be expected to continue Khamtai's conservative policies.

¶2. (U) According to his official biography, Choummaly, an ethnic Lao, was born March 6, 1936 in Vat Neau village, Saysettha district of Attapeu province, in Laos' far south-east. In 1954 he "joined the revolution," becoming a soldier with the Pathet Lao forces who at that time, following the end of the French Indochina War, were regrouping in the two "liberated" provinces of Houaphanh and Phongsaly. He became a member of the Communist Party on December 7, 1955. From 1955 until the establishment of the Lao PDR in 1975 he served in a variety of military positions, gradually rising through the ranks. Little is known of his service during the war years, although he reportedly spent much of his time at the Pathet Lao headquarters of Viengsai, in Houaphanh province.

¶3. (U) At the end of the war in 1975, Choummaly became Deputy Chief of the Army Chief of Staff, a position he held until 1982. In that year he was promoted to be Vice Minister of Defense, and in 1988 was named First Deputy Defense Minister, second only to Minister Khamtai. In this position he reportedly ran the day-to-day affairs of the Ministry. Throughout the early post-war period, Choummaly traveled widely within the socialist bloc, representing the Lao People's Army as he sought aid and assistance from abroad.

¶4. (U) In 1990 Choummaly was promoted to Lieutenant General, and the following year was named Minister of Defense, replacing General Khamtai, who became Prime Minister. He advanced again in 1998, becoming a Deputy Prime Minister and reporting directly to his mentor and patron, the by now President Khamtai. In his capacity as Deputy PM, he supervised the rural development program, and was a proponent of resettlement of ethnic minorities to lowland areas, a policy adopted by the Party at the 2001 Seventh Party Congress. In 2002 the National Assembly elected Choummaly

Vice President, a position he retains.

¶ 15. (U) Choummaly was first elected a member of the Central Committee at the 3rd Party Congress in 1982, in 43rd position. At the 4th Congress in 1986, he jumped to number 13 on the CC, just short of the Politburo. He entered the Politburo at the 1991 5th Congress, at number 7, and by the 1996 6th Party Congress had reached the number 3 slot, a ranking he retained at the 2001 7th Party Congress.

¶ 16. (C) Choummaly is widely regarded as a protege of retiring Party Secretary Khamtai, and his career has largely tracked that of the former Party Secretary. Choummaly served close to Khamtai during the war years, and was reportedly Khamtai's hand-picked successor as Minister of Defense. His relatively rapid rise through the Party ranks is due to the retired Secretary-General's patronage. According to Party insiders,

SIPDIS

his promotion during the 8th Party Congress in March to Party Secretary was Khamtai's handiwork as well -- Khamtai agreed

SIPDIS

to relinquish his position in return, in part, for Choummaly's promotion over Politburo number 2 Samane Viyaket to become the new Secretary-General.

¶ 17. (C) Since his 2002 election as Vice President, Choummaly has become prominent in Laos' diplomatic circuit, often standing in for President Khamtai to receive official state visitors and credentials of new Ambassadors. In this capacity he met on two occasions with the then U.S. Ambassador. He rarely strayed far from talking points in these meetings, but exhibited an engaged personality, with an interest in issues outside Laos' borders. That said, those within the Party do not regard him as an innovator; his success has been almost entirely due to his close relationship with Khamtai and to his unquestioning obedience to the Party. He has a

VIENTIANE 00000312 002 OF 002

reputation as something of a hard liner, in the same vein as Khamtai, putting regime security before other concerns. He also reportedly retains Khamtai's close ties to Vietnam, by virtue of having served side-by-side with PAVN forces during the war and of Vietnam's long tutelage of the Lao Defense Ministry after 1975. As Party Secretary he can be expected to continue Khamtai's conservative, pro-Vietnam policies.

¶ 18. (C) On a personal level, Choummaly has a reputation for misusing his power. We have heard reports from a variety of sources that Choummaly had on occasion used his authority to arrogate for himself or his family land and property belonging to others. He is known to own large tracts of lands around Vientiane, as well as a number of houses. While little is known of his personal life, he has a number of children; his oldest, a boy, is about 40. Choummaly speaks Vietnamese, and studied political theory in Hanoi. He also reportedly studied for a time in the Soviet Union, and may speak some Russian. Choummaly's health has reportedly been frail in recent years. During 8th Party Congress events, however, he appeared in good health.

HASLACH